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## PERMANENT COMMISSION ON THE STATUS OF WOMEN

18-20 TRINITY STREET  
HARTFORD, CT 06106-1628

(860) 240-8300

FAX: (860) 240-8314

Email: [pcsw@cga.ct.gov](mailto:pcsw@cga.ct.gov)

[www.cga.ct.gov/PCSW](http://www.cga.ct.gov/PCSW)

### Testimony of Natasha M. Pierre Associate Legislative Analyst Permanent Commission on the Status of Women Before the Select Committee on Children Tuesday, February 28, 2006

#### In Support of:

**H.B. 5504, AAC A Safe Learning Environment for Children and Youth**

**H.B. 5507, AAC Eligibility and Reimbursement Under the Care4Kids Program**

Good morning Senator Meyer, Representative Cardin and members of the committee. My name is Natasha Pierre and I am the Associate Legislative Analyst for the Permanent Commission on the Status of Women. I am pleased to testify this morning in support of **H.B. 5507, AAC Eligibility and Reimbursement Under the Care4Kids Program** and **H.B. 5504, AAC A Safe Learning Environment for Children and Youth**.

#### **H.B. 5507, AAC Eligibility and Reimbursement Under the Care4Kids Program**

PCSW supports H.B. 5507, which would revise eligibility limits and provider reimbursement standards under the Care4Kids program. The Care4Kids program was established as a work support for moderate- and low-income families who need help paying for early care and education while parents are at work, in school or in training. Since 2002, funding has dropped by 56% from its peak of \$121.5 million to \$69 million; and enrollment has dropped from 28,175 to 14,665 children.

The current caseload would appear to indicate that the funding supply is keeping pace with the demand; however, this is not the case. Currently, there is a 52% denial rate of families who have applied for subsidies since the program reopened last spring. There are two key state policy and regulatory changes that have reduced the participation rates and the ability of parents to find high-quality settings for their young children. First, the eligibility threshold for child care subsidies has been reduced from 75% of the state median income (SMI) to 50% of SMI.<sup>1</sup> The federal recommendation is 85% of SMI. This bill would provide a phase in beginning at 60% SMI and ending at 75% SMI. Secondly, the current reimbursement rate is below the recommended percentile and out of date. Federal law requires states to conduct a biennial market rate survey to ensure that payment rates are sufficient to provide access to child care services for eligible families. While federal regulations do not identify a specific percentage, it notes that payments “...at the 75<sup>th</sup> percentile market rate would be regarded as providing equal access.” The state currently reimburses at the 60<sup>th</sup> percentile of the 2000 biennial market rate survey. This bill would require the state to utilize the most recent market survey rate.

This proposal would assist families who are still struggling to remain self-sufficient to obtain safe, secure early care and education for their children while they are at work. Funding for childcare assists everyone. It assists parents by providing adequate child care while they work; it supports employers by ensuring that their employees can be productive at work knowing their children are in safe and productive environments; and it benefits the overall state economy by helping to grow a professional and competent workforce.

### **H.B. 5504, AAC A Safe Learning Environment for Children and Youth**

We also support H.B. 5504 which would strengthen our state response to bullying and harassment of children in schools by requiring schools to evaluate and document the effectiveness of their programs, provide technical assistance and a state ombudsperson to help schools respond to bullying, and provide funding to schools in the amount of \$1 million for innovative and effective programs to promote safe learning environments. The bill also calls on schools to focus on the relationship between bullying and school drop-out rates and student suicides.

The PCSW and other groups advocating for gender equity in schools have been focusing on sexual harassment and discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation against students for many years. We believe the focus on bullying is complementary to this work and may include some but not all instances of sexual harassment and gender-based discrimination. In recent years, the resources available to monitor and enforce compliance with Title IX, the federal law prohibiting discrimination on the basis of gender, have been reduced. Therefore, we support any increased focus and resources that will enable local school districts to reduce bullying and harassment and promote an equitable and safe learning environment for all children.

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<sup>1</sup> In Connecticut, the SMI for a family of two is \$28,119 at 50% and \$42,178 at 75%.

Thank you for raising these important bills and allowing us to express our opinion on the matter.